

Fire rules aim to curb pollution

By Alex Breitler, Record Staff Writer
The Stockton Record, November 22, 2006

There are those who occasionally light a fire.

And then there's Charlie Mendoza, who keeps a blaze crackling in the hearth from morning till evening nearly every day this time of year.

"It's a mood thing," said Mendoza, a correctional officer who has lived in the San Joaquin Valley for 43 years. "It's just nice to walk in from the outside, where it's cold and dark, and come into a room that's warm and light."

Come Thanksgiving, many residents will load up their wood stoves or fireplaces for the first time this year. Perhaps that's why air-quality officials typically see a spike in the amount of particulate-matter pollution on that holiday, along with Christmas, New Year's Day and even Super Bowl Sunday.

Before you crinkle up this newspaper and throw it in the tinderbox, no one is saying you shouldn't have a roaring blaze to go along with your turkey.

But the air-quality cops do ask that you call first to make sure it's OK to burn.

This is the fourth year of the Check Before You Burn program, organized by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

On stagnant, foggy days when pollution is trapped near the Valley floor, the district can issue orders outlawing residential burning of wood, pellets and manufactured fire logs. This happened only once in San Joaquin County last year, but there were 14 additional days on which residents were asked voluntarily to avoid burning.

The consequences of ignoring a no-burn order can be a \$50 ticket for first-time offenders. Nine violations were issued in San Joaquin County last year and more than 150 throughout the Valley, driven mostly by complaints and inspectors' observations.

The program appears to have helped, a district spokeswoman said: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced last month that the Valley has met federal standards for PM-10, particulate matter that is about one-seventh the size of a human hair.

"We want to thank everyone for their support," district spokeswoman Brenda Turner said. "Our air is getting cleaner, and that's something we can all be proud of."

The Valley has not met standards, however, for PM-2.5, even smaller and deadlier particles that can lodge in lung tissue and exacerbate respiratory problems such as asthma while contributing to lung disease and cancer.

"It's very important healthwise for us to continue," Turner said.

Conservation groups that monitor Valley air policy say they're glad residents are doing their part each winter.

"That's when the Valley's air is at its worst," said Brent Newell, an attorney with the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment.

But, he said, officials also should regulate agricultural operations as a source of particulate emissions.

Mendoza said he goes through about 11/2 cords of wood each winter. That's about enough to load up three full-size pickups.

But he's careful about checking with the district before dropping a log in the fireplace.

And on those rare occasions when burning is out of the question, he said, "I just turn the heater on."

Burning questions

The air district's mandatory wood-burning prohibitions do not apply to:

- Homes with fireplaces or stoves that rely exclusively on natural gas or propane.
- Homes that are not connected to natural-gas services.
- Homes 3,000 feet in elevation or higher.
- Homes where wood burning is the sole source of heat.
- Devices that are used for cooking.

Burning status for a given day is decided the previous afternoon based on weather and pollution forecasts. Call (800) 766-4463 or visit www.valleyair.org and click on "Air Quality Information."

Air board reviews engine registration

By Darrell Smith, staff writer

Sacramento Bee, Tuesday, November 21, 2006

Facing complaints from dozens of small-business owners in California's construction industry, state officials are considering reopening a disputed registration program for portable, diesel-powered engines and equipment.

A draft proposal allowing those operators to legally register their equipment and resume operations was aired Monday at a California Air Resources Board hearing that included construction industry leaders and small-business operators of cranes, pumpers, compressors and other diesel-powered equipment.

"We're trying to fix this once and for all. That's what we're trying to do," said Michael Tollstrup, chief of the Air Resources Board's project assessment branch.

Late last year, the board closed its equipment registration program, the portable equipment registration program known as PERP, leaving hundreds of small-business owners facing fines or with equipment they couldn't legally use in California.

It sparked an outcry that led to Monday's hearing. If the staff proposal is approved by the full board, small-equipment operators could have another 120 days to legally register their equipment.

Still under discussion are registration fees and penalty amounts for late registration, as well as which engines can be registered in California. The proposed fees ranged from roughly \$300 to more than \$3,000, depending on when the equipment was purchased.

To improve the state's air quality standards, Air Resources Board staffers have proposed banning older engines built before 2004 from PERP registration.

But replacing those engines would be prohibitive, according to several officials representing the Construction Air Quality Coalition, which includes the four largest Southern California construction industry associations. The coalition proposed that older, so-called "Tier 0" engines remain eligible for use in California until 2009.

The Air Resources Board plans to consider the proposal at its Dec. 7 meeting.

Construction industry leaders have said that hundreds of diesel-power equipment operators were unaware of the state's earlier registration deadlines. By not extending the deadline to legally operate, the state could cripple the construction industry because it relies on so many of these equipment operators, they say.

State ballot measures to benefit Bakersfield

By David Burger, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, November 22, 2006

Jim Howard, 57, who often hangs out downtown, said he was especially supportive of the November ballot Measure 1C, which aimed to provide flood control.

"Without that, I wouldn't be able to take a bus here," said Howard, who was nervous about news of leaks at the Isabella Lake dam possibly flooding the metro area. "I'd have to take a boat."

The five parts of Measure 1 were approved by voters on Election Day. Combined, the bond money is worth about \$37 billion.

Voters want to know: Now what?

The November approval of the five parts -- 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D and 1E -- will have an impact on Bakersfield, Assistant City Manager John Stinson said.

He provided an overview of how each measure will impact the average Bakersfield resident.

Proposition 1A

What it is: Called the Transportation Funding Protection amendment, this ballot measure passed with 77 percent of the state's votes.

The measure is not a bond, but a way to "fix" a 2002 ballot measure -- Prop. 42 -- so that nearly all sales taxes on gasoline go toward transportation purposes, Stinson said. The measure will also restrict the Legislature's ability to borrow local money.

Bakersfield benefit: There will be more stability for local road funds, Stinson said. The state won't be able to take away much-needed money from the city, which needs the money to fix residential streets, he said.

Reaction: Bakersfield resident Enrique Espinoza, 22, said he supports more money for local roads.

"Everything east of Union (Avenue), you can't drive down a road without swerving because of the potholes," he said.

Proposition 1B

What it is: Called the Highway Safety, Traffic Reduction, Air Quality and Port Security Bond Act, this ballot measure passed with 61 percent of the state's votes.

This measure includes many programs that are designed to help local communities across the state, including commuter rail projects and other ways in which [air quality](#) will benefit from transportation improvements.

Bakersfield benefit: \$1 billion has been allocated to improve Highway 99, Stinson said. In addition, the city gets \$9.9 million to improve local streets and roads.

Reaction: County resident Vincent Cline, 42, hopes one road that will be fixed is Rosedale Highway.

"It's a nightmare," Cline said of the highway.

Proposition 1C

What it is: Called the Housing and Emergency Shelter Trust Fund Act, this measure passed with 58 percent of the vote.

Affordable housing construction, parks and homeless housing construction will result from the ballot measure, Stinson said.

Bakersfield benefit: The city's economic and community development department will be able to compete for the money, allocated by the state, Stinson said. In addition, the city's Mill Creek project might be able to compete for, among other sources, a portion of \$200 million allocated to parks.

Reaction: Bakersfield resident Kevin Roberts, 40, said affordable housing is what everyone, not just the homeless, needs.

"The government needs to be more like churches," he said, alluding to faith-based charity movements.

Roberts said he would have voted for the ballot measure if there had been more publicity to explain what it did. He said he only voted on two items on Nov. 7: for Nicole Parra and against the cigarette tax.

Proposition 1D

What it is: This proposition, called the Kindergarten-University Public Education Facilities Bond, passed with 57 percent of the statewide vote.

While designed to help all the school-age children in Bakersfield, the city doesn't receive any funding from this measure: schools, not cities, get money from the \$10.4-billion bond.

Proposition 1E

What it is: Called the Disaster Preparedness and Flood Prevention Bond Act, this ballot measure passed with 64 percent of the vote.

This \$4.1 billion bond will focus on repairing levees and other flood control measures in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

Bakersfield benefit: Although most of the money looks earmarked for up north, there is potential for the city to compete for grant funds to manage storm water runoff, levee repairs and ground water recharge projects, Stinson said.

The future

The Rev. Daniel Gorman, executive director of the Bakersfield Rescue Mission, hopes that promises made by proposition proponents and politicians make their way to agencies and people who really need it.

"With a lot of these, (I ask), how does it trickle down?" he said. "It takes a charity of government itself."

Merced Briefs

CDF announces an early end to fire season

Merced Sun-Star Friday, November 17, 2006

Fire season will come to a close Monday, thanks to the wet weather earlier this week.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection reported that fire season will end in the area at 8 a.m. Monday.

The state's suspension of open burning also will be lifted.

With the closing of fire season, open burning will be allowed 24 hours a day on permissive burn days in what the CDF calls the Madera-Mariposa-Merced unit.

Residential debris burning hasn't been allowed in Merced County since the summer when the CDF officials say residential debris burning can be hazardous. To keep fire hazards down, the CDF suspends all burn permits. These restrictions are usually lifted in the winter months.

For more information on permissive burn days, wood burning season and other air quality issues, call the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District at 800-766-4463.

More cities reject coal-fired power

They join L.A. against contract renewal with a Utah plant as pressure over pollution mounts.

By Janet Wilson, staff writer

L.A. Times, Wednesday, November 22, 2006

In an abrupt about-face, Burbank and several other Southern California cities are joining with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power in abandoning plans to renew long-term contracts for coal-fired electricity from a Utah power plant.

In forsaking their largest power source, the cities will be gambling on the availability of adequate alternative energy from cleaner sources by 2027, after their current contracts with the Utah facility expire.

"It's a huge change," Burbank Mayor Todd Campbell cheerfully admitted. Campbell and the City Council had voted unanimously last month to extend their contract with the Intermountain Power Agency in Delta, Utah, to 2044, seeking to beat the clock on a landmark greenhouse-gas state law that takes effect Jan. 1 prohibiting such contract renewals.

The change could put Southern California in the forefront nationally of the commercial use of alternative energy in coming years, including wind and solar power. It could also put the region ahead in the capture and burial of carbon dioxide, the greenhouse gas believed to be most responsible for global warming.

Six of the Southland's largest cities depend on Intermountain for half to two-thirds of their electricity. Researching and building infrastructure to replace it will be a costly, risky business, utility managers warned.

"It's a very challenging undertaking. All of these technologies are still in their infancy," said Phyllis Currie, general manager of Pasadena Water & Power. Pasadena is one of the cities joining in the decision. "We're still looking at the fact that right now, the Intermountain plant is 65% of our energy."

DWP President David Nahai, who already had said the city would not renew its contract with Intermountain, said, "We're very pleased that our fellow cities have decided not to renew their contracts either. Many of them had initially decided to do so, and then I think really showed a lot of courage and grace in reconsidering their decision."

Pasadena, Burbank, Glendale, Riverside and Anaheim representatives all told Intermountain's General Manager Reed Searle on Monday at the utility's quarterly meeting that they would not be renewing their contracts for cheap, coal-fired power.

"That is correct. I think everybody has decided basically not to renew at this time," Searle said Tuesday, noting with exasperation that the agency had drawn up the renewal contracts "at the request of the Californians" and that he had gone to the Utah Legislature to obtain special permission to do so.

The cities acted in the face of mounting pressure from local constituents, environmentalists and politicians, including Sen. Dianne Feinstein and state Sen. Don Perata (D-Oakland), author of the greenhouse-gas legislation, which includes a ban on power from sources that generate more such gases than in-state natural gas plants. Feinstein wrote a letter to an umbrella group for the cities last week saying she was "shocked and dismayed by Burbank's decision" after the council had voted to renew its contract with Intermountain.

Staff members of several utilities met in Sacramento on Monday with Perata's and other legislators' staff to explain what was at stake for the cities and ratepayers.

"We basically wanted to explain how important Intermountain Power is to California cities.... It's a serious issue when you tell us to walk away from it," said Currie, who like others noted that the cities had been paying billions in long-term costs for construction of the coal plants but would lose

the right to much cheaper power after those costs were paid off in 2027 and their contracts expired.

Traditional coal-fired plants are the cheapest, most reliable source of power but emit tons of carbon dioxide skyward along with other harmful air pollutants. Annual CO2 emissions at the Intermountain plants total more than 16 million tons, according to an analysis by the conservation group Environmental Defense.

V. John White of the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technology, which is part of an environmental consortium trying to replace coal-fired power across the West, said Intermountain is "not used to the light of day. They're used to having a cocktail with a city official and renewing a deal" with no public discussion. He said the change of heart by Southern California officials occurred because "there was a public outcry, and it forced yes or no votes on global warming."

He said the next challenge would be to thoughtfully consider all available alternatives, from wind farms in the Tehachapi Mountains north of Los Angeles to desert solar power.

Intermountain's Searle said the Utah agency worked for three years on the renewals and now was looking at ways to modernize its plants to bring them into compliance with California's greenhouse-gas legislation, including burning biomass — which includes fast-growing trees and plants as well as waste products — instead of coal, or possible burial of carbon dioxide. He warned that such measures "will be costly" to consumers.

Biomass conversion would cost about \$300 million, he said, and carbon capture and sequestration technologies would cost billions. But Searle said the Utah plants were uniquely situated over a large salt dome that could be ideal as an underground storage site for the gas. The agency also extended its renewal offer for any sort of power from the plants until 2023. The previous deadline was next May. California utility officials hope that state legislators will allow them to renew the contracts if greenhouse gases are reduced.

"We can't just blanket 100 miles of the desert with solar panels. And besides, solar doesn't work at night," said David Wright, general manager of Riverside Public Utilities. He and Burbank officials said they were most interested in integrated gasification combined cycle power, which creates cleaner gas and steam power from coal and could allow CO2 to be separated and buried.

The DWP's Nahai said the fact that the current contracts don't expire until 2027 leaves ample time.

"None of us are going to impose an economic upheaval on society, so of course the issue of cost is tremendously important," Nahai said. "But the question of benefits is also important ... and 21 years is a long time."

But Wright said, "Everybody keeps saying we can replace that power in 20 years. But we don't just replace that power with a decision in 20 years. We have to decide in the next five years where we're going to get that power, and start constructing it."